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ABSTRACT

Rural gifted programs should be developed by the consumers in rural communities and should focus on the needs and strengths of the community. The unique aspects of rural schools should be used to develop defensible community-based programs. General gifted education procedures, such as developing peer groups and psychologically secure environments, should be followed, but grouping provisions from larger urban settings are not generally appropriate. Curricula for gifted students should be modified in terms of rate of progress, control of content, and type of content. These content changes, as well as changes in instructional formats, may be accomplished or supported using modern technological means, particularly computers. When the local program requires it, teachers or students may be transported to off-campus locations to meet program goals. Support activities may be provided out of school, but these activities should be in addition to a regular education program for gifted students. (JHZ)

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ERIC DIGEST

RURAL EDUCATION

RURAL OPTIONS FOR GIFTED EDUCATION

by

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ERIC DIGEST

RURAL EDUCATION

RURAL OPTIONS FOR GIFTED EDUCATION

Most rural schools are small and far from the Ivory Towers of Academia. This means that, until recently, researchers have not investigated what is working in Rural America, particularly in the area of gifted education (Anderson & Kleinsassar, 1986). Much of what is known about gifted children (defined here as academically gifted) is based upon data gathered or experiences reported in urban settings. Because of this urban flavor, rural settings are often thought of as intellectual and cultural wastelands which are potentially harmful to the gifted child (Witters & Vasa, 1981.) What we must realize, however, is that each setting offers unique opportunities for the learning of its gifted children.

What is Unique About Rural Gifted Education?

Rural schools should not try to replicate urban programs, nor should academics try to impose urban models on rural schools (Bullerdieck, 1985). Those who live in rural areas must develop their own programs based on the strengths of their school and community (Nachtigal, 1980; Barker & Muse, 1984). The following list suggests some of the unique features of rural schools as they relate to gifted students:

- Small class size. This allows teachers to spend more time with students, thus individualizing the curriculum to meet the needs of the gifted child.
- A role for every student. Small schools need everyone for academics, art, sports, etc. No one, including the gifted child, can be an isolate and withdraw.
- More potential for multiple age grouping. This allows gifted students to move ahead academically without being uprooted from their chronological age peer group.
- Greater opportunity for teacher mentoring. In small schools, the student load is lower and a greater percentage of students can be mentored.
- Great potential for community involvement with gifted children because all of them are known to the community and to other children.
- More potential for flexibility of course offerings at the Junior/Senior High level. In small schools there are fewer proprietary interests in filling certain high level courses; therefore, more opportunity exists for individualization using non-traditional methods.

What are the General Techniques Which Should Be Used in Gifted Programs?

Many techniques are specific to program types and configurations. The ones listed here are generic to almost all programs for the gifted:

- Provide access to intellectual peers for interaction, sharing, self-comparison and some limited competition.
- Provide challenging activities in the areas where the student exhibits interest.
- Provide a psychologically secure environment where the student can take risks and gain independence.
- Provide appropriate, differentiated education. Remember that students are gifted all of the time, not just part of the day or week. Students who are pulled out of a regular class to go to gifted class should not make up work missed, their regular classwork should be individualized, too!
- Provide an opportunity to receive feedback (grades) on performance that does not jeopardize the student's chances for a scholarship. Use a 6 point rather than a 4 point system for gifted students (where A = 6, B = 5, etc., so that gifted children who receive a "C" in gifted class get a "4", which equals a regular "A" on their transcripts).
- Provide cooperative learning opportunities, e.g., team creativity or problem solving, so that gifted children do not become isolated from their peers.
- Let them make mistakes without fear of punishment if you wish to foster risk taking and independent learning.
- Help the students learn to self-evaluate.
- Give them choices.
- Allow students to have their own ideas, beliefs, and values.
- Allow students to contract for independent activities.

What kinds of grouping provisions work well for rural gifted students?

The typical cascade model of service for gifted children (Bull & Otey, 1984), which assumes that the regular classroom is the most restrictive environment, is inappropriate in most rural settings. This model, which starts with a regular classroom and moves step by step to resource room, to special classroom, to a school for the gifted, and to off-campus (usually college) placement, requires a level of service that can only be functional in very populated and well-to-do districts. Many levels of such "traditional" gifted education are unavailable in small rural settings.

If a sufficient number of students is available to warrant a special program. Students should be pulled out of the regular classroom only when they will benefit from the educational activity that cannot be provided within the regular classroom environment—not just because they are labeled gifted. Students may also be cluster grouped, i.e., they may have their schedules arranged so that they are assigned to the same teacher or have the same free or study period so that they can occassionally interact in a small group.

In schools with smaller enrollments cross-age tutoring may be used to provide for gifted students; older students share their strengths with other younger or less knowledgeable students. With even smaller enrollments, the multi-age, multi-grade classroom, with a good, flexible teacher (the one room schoolhouse) can provide many opportunities for going deeper into the material or going through the curriculum at a more rapid pace.

What kinds of curricular provisions are suggested for use in rural schools with gifted students?

Three kinds of curricular modifications are typically suggested by gifted educators. They may be used individually or in combination and consist of changes in rate of process, changes in control of content, and changes in content to something not normally offered.

Changes in rate of process include:

- Flexible scheduling: Students attends regular class less often than their peers. This allows additional time for other activities.
- Telescoping (compacting) the curriculum: Only the must-know information is taught.
- Acceleration: Grade skipping or moving rapidly ahead in a single academic content area.
- Out-of-level texts: Advanced material is provided and students move at their own best rate of speed.
- Independent learning units: Contain objectives, activities, reading material, etc., which allow students to progress through courses at their own pace.

Changes in control of content include:

- Independent study: Unless independent study is a class itself, it should be used instead of, rather than in addition to, the regular course content (Rowe, 1981).

Changes in content to something not normally offered include:

- Advanced placement courses: Courses with curricula developed to meet college standards, offered under the auspices of the College Entrance Examining Board.
- Correspondence courses: For junior and senior high students who can study independently. Offered by many universities, some state departments of education (MA, ND), and by The Home Study Institute. A review of correspondence courses offered for gifted is found in Miller (1981).
- OM (formerly Olympics of the Mind): A creativity competition for students K-12. Problems are provided in several areas, e.g., engineering, art, drama, literature. (OM Association, P.O. Box 27, Glassboro, NJ, 08028.)
- Future problem solving: Competitive four-member group working on solutions to creative, future oriented problems. (Ann Crabbe, St. Andrews College, Laurinsburg, NC.)
- College Bowl (Knowledge Bowl): Group competition modeled on the "Sixty-Four Thousand Dollar Question" quiz show or Trivial Pursuit (Williams, 1986).
- Great Books and Junior Great Books: Student or a small group works with an adult discussion leader using a prepared question guide and discusses great literature. (Great Books Foundation, 1974, Junior Great Books, 40 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611)

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How Can Technology Provide Access to Resources Not Usually Available in Rural Settings?

Before technology can be adopted in a rural school, two events need to take place: (1) regular teachers in the school must understand that the technology will be used to supplement what they do rather than to supplant them; and (2) the community must accept the idea of technology-based education. Information and experience with new technology should be provided to community members in as concrete and experiential a way as possible. Without exposure, there may be resistance to "new fangled" ideas and technology.

Technology can be used in two ways: to access people or content. Ways to access people include:

- The telephone system to access mentors in an independent study hotline, contact experts through the Wide Area Telephone System (WATS), bring students in different communities together for interaction with conference calls, and interconnect students in remote/isolated areas by statewide audio teleconferences, as in Montana.
- Two-way radio to provide contact between teacher and students has been used in Australia.
- Interactive instructional television.
- Electronic mail systems using a microcomputer and modem.
- Audio or video cassette exchange to facilitate communication between student and student, teacher, or mentor.

Content may be accessed technologically by:

- Videotext, which broadcasts information to television sets and accesses databases for research, via microcomputers.
- Videodiscs which enable students to interact with a videorecording of text or pictures.
- Microcomputers which teach content with software housed on floppy discs or downloaded from a mainframe.
- Instructional television through which many colleges provide courses using either line-of-sight or satellite technology or videotape. Enrichment activities, e.g., plays, concerts, an so forth, are available off the air or for purchase from PBS and other producers (Rosburg, 1981).
- Public radio networks (state or NPR) which sponsor programs in conjunction with a teacher or mentor.
- Audio or video cassettes which can be purchased or rented through media vendors.

What Role Can Transportation Play In Rural Gifted Education?

Some procedures involving transportation include:

- Cultural enrichment: Students can be transported to cultural events in the surrounding area (e.g., theatre, concerts)
- Multidistrict mobile program: Each semester the mobile van/truck/trailer goes to a different district and provides, for example, gifted science (Barker & Muse, 1984).
- Traveling teacher: A mobile teacher comes periodically to the district to provide gifted education or to supplement what the regular teacher provides in terms of appropriate differentiated education.
- Busing: Students are bused, either periodically or daily, to a central location where gifted education is provided.
- Exchange programs: Rural gifted students trade places with urban students, a method used to expose the student to a culture not available in a rural setting.
- Foreign student exchange programs: American Field Service places select high school students with families in other countries for a summer or a year.

What are Some Out-of School Activities for Gifted Students?

- Internships, externships and apprenticeships: Students can volunteer to work with individuals or groups in the community to gain experience in or appreciation of a type of employment or to gain specific skills.
- Mentor programs: The student is matched with an expert (by vocation or avocation) who will facilitate and guide the student's development in an area of interest. There are as many experts in rural areas as there are in urban areas. They may, however, be expert in different things.
- Weekend or Saturday programs: Usually provided by colleges (e.g., J. Feldhusen, Purdue University) or intermediate service units (BOCES) (Porter, 1978). Inquire at colleges and universities in your area.
- Convocations: These multidistrict conventions explore controversial issues, e.g., nuclear power. While students try to understand and develop solutions or position statements on the problems (Strobert & Alvarez, 1982).
- Summer school programs: Usually offered by colleges or consortia of schools to provide enrichment or education in areas not conventionally offered by the schools. A comprehensive list of summer programs is published annually by G/C/T (G/C/T, P.O. Box 66654, Mobile, AL 36660 and by NAGC, 4175 Lovell Rd., Box 30, Suite 140, Circle Pines, MN 55014)

Most extracurricular activities should be interest based. No students should be arbitrarily assigned to one, nor should they be given grades (Porter, 1983).

Summary

Rural gifted programs should be developed by the consumers in rural communities and should focus on the needs and strengths of the community. The unique aspects of rural schools should be utilized to develop defensible community-based programs. General gifted education procedures, such as developing peer groups and psychologically secure environments, should be followed, but grouping provisions from larger urban settings are not generally appropriate. Curricula for gifted students should be modified in terms of rate of progress, control of content, and type of content. These content changes as well as changes in instructional formats, may be accomplished or supported using modern technoldgical means, particularly computers. When the local program requires it, teachers or students may be transported to off-campus locations to meet program goals. Support activities may be provided out of school, but these activities should be in addition to a regular education program for gifted students.

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